

SPEED
OF SIGHT

A SUPERHERO ADVENTURE

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Chapter 1

Ghost Town

Jericho was a strange but predictable town where people went crazy trying not to upset anyone. They lived by the clock and clung to dull routines so that they appeared as normal as possible. The rows of square lawns, white picket fences and brown-gray cookie cutter houses that adorned most neighborhoods gave proof of their devotion to tradition. All forms of so-called “reckless creativity” had been outlawed, including a special brand of comic book with colorful pictures and speech balloons that anyone could read and understand. If you got caught with one, you could get sent to jail.

Twelve-old Pete Plain knew such comic books spelled trouble, and he wasn't the sort of boy to risk prison over one. Too well-behaved to break a rule at school or start a fight, he wanted only a calm and peaceful life.

He didn't look for trouble, but it found him. From the second the comic book was thrust into his hands, he felt the danger, but its mysterious powers drew him in and left him hungering for more. His best friend snatched it from him, though, fearful of what Pete had done.

The comic book had taken Pete on a fantastic adventure. He couldn't rest until he got it back.

His mind drifted back to the morning's strange events, beginning with the voice he heard inside his head when he woke up.

"Loser!" it kept calling him. "You're such a loser!"

Pete covered his ears and moaned. "Leave me alone."

All at once, a ray of sunlight streamed through his bedroom window, filling the room with warmth. He heard a click.

Pete's eyes shot open. At the door, he saw a heart-shaped face framed by tight, brown curls.

His mother's blue eyes twinkled. "Time to get up and get educated." She smoothed a wrinkle from her beige business suit, turned, and headed downstairs.

Pete yawned as he threw off his covers. "School is overrated. There should be a law against it."

Pete hated school because he was shorter than his classmates and his teachers only taught dry facts, not useful skills such as how to handle bullies or get his parents to buy him a dog. Reading the books was so boring, he took half an hour to muddle through one page. He never won a group game, and in nearly every subject he was average: English, science, music, and even physical education. He was so bad at sports he thought for sure he'd win the Super Flop prize, but Jimmy Crutchton limped away with that, making Pete feel like a *real* loser.

He stepped out of bed when something brushed up against his legs, causing him to trip and bang his right knee.

"Ow! How did I get such bad luck?"

Pete hobbled to a heap of clothes stacked on his closet floor and pulled out a drawing he had made of a wrinkle-faced elderly lady, his mean sixth-grade teacher Mrs. Fischer. She wore a tattered dress and held a long red pen which radiated F's and X's. It was pointed at the backs of two unsuspecting kids.

"Jack's teacher is so much nicer. I wish I could be in her class," Pete mumbled. He also wished his elementary school only went up to fifth grade. Then he'd be in middle school, and he'd have Mrs. Fischer for only one subject. But that wasn't how things worked in Jericho.

The picture Pete drew of his teacher was fairly lifelike, but most people in Jericho might consider it too creative—not due to its bold colors, but because he drew it freehand instead of following the black-and-white rules in his art book. Pete’s artistic approach to subjects earned him a few minuses, which kept his grades much lower than he wanted them to be.

Pete placed the picture on a shelf at the top of his closet. Then, he plucked a pair of ragged blue jeans from his clothes pile, along with a red-collared shirt, and two mismatched socks. He got dressed, walked to the bathroom, and brushed his teeth, then grabbed his comb from the sink and ran it through his thick brown hair.

One stroke, two, and then three. In the mirror, he saw a shadowy blur pop up behind him.

Pete wheeled to face it, but all he saw was wallpaper—blue and yellow fish swimming in a brownish-gray sea. A twinge of fear raced through his veins, but he shrugged it off.

He must have imagined it.

He ran the comb through his hair a couple more times. As he set the comb down, he saw another shadow appear in the mirror. It rushed by in a hazy blur and vanished in a wisp of black smoke. Pete rubbed his eyes. That was weird.

He glanced at the bathroom curtains, wondering if a breeze had stirred them, creating a shadow. But the window was closed, and the curtains remained still.

“It’s probably just nerves, so don’t worry,” Pete told himself, trying to be brave. “Nothing terrible is going to ruin our summer break.” He tiptoed carefully back to his room and did a thorough safety check.

Dresser: check, no shadows there. Closet: check. Unmade bed: double check.

Pete picked his black-rimmed glasses off his nightstand and put them in his shirt pocket. He hated wearing them but wanted his last day at Jericho Elementary to be a good one. Then he searched beneath his bed for his steel-toed orthopedic shoes, designed to keep him from tripping. He had always been slightly accident-prone, and

no one could explain the reason why. The doctors couldn't cure him, so they decided to regulate his movement instead. That was how things worked in Jericho. If a person had a problem that couldn't be explained, the answer was usually to put more limits on him or her. Pete's hard, pinching shoes were like rules for his feet. Instead of helping him walk better, they drew attention to his problem while making it appear as if the doctors were doing their very best to solve it. Pete had long outgrown his most recent pair of orthopedic shoes. As he snatched them up, he saw another shadow whiz by.

That was getting spooky.

Hands trembling, he shoved his shoes on and snatched up his backpack. As he left his room, a roar came from his closet.

He froze. "Don't be scared, Pete. I'm sure it's just a—" "GRR . . . GRR . . ."

With a startled cry, Pete bolted down the hall. He reached the steps and bounded down them two at a time. The front door was in sight.

"And where do you think you're going without any breakfast?" his mom demanded.

Pete jumped. "You scared me. Ow!" A sudden, sharp pain from nowhere shot through his foot.

"Calm down, Pete. You'll be fine." She grabbed his arm and dragged him into the kitchen to a round, chocolate-brown table where his father sat, engrossed in the morning newspaper. The scattered strands of thinning brown hair that hung over the man's brow couldn't hide the frown etched on his forehead.

Pete heard a frightening growl from the floor above. "Th—Th—there's something in the house, Dad. It's in my room!"

His father's brown eyes remained focused on the comics. As a copy editor for the Jericho Times, he had to make sure the children's page was error-free. Pete yanked at a corner of the newspaper.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" Mr. Plain pulled the paper closer to his face.

"It's an emergency," Pete said. "There's a wild animal upstairs!"

"Nonsense. That mischievous raccoon left the attic weeks ago."

"But, Dad—" Pete began.

“Shh, leave him alone while you eat,” his mother said, handing Pete a bowl of mushy oatmeal made with skim milk. She pulled up a chair and made him sit.

Pete stood again and pointed to the ceiling. “But don’t you hear those scratching noises?”

“Maybe it’s mice. That’s the price you pay for making your room a rat’s nest.” His mother’s brown curls bounced as she spoke.

“But it’s not a mouse, and it’s not a raccoon,” Pete continued.

“Then what is it?”

Pete took a deep breath. “I don’t know. It’s like I’ve been jinxed.”

Mr. Plain ruffled his newspaper. “Jinxes don’t exist. Stop making up silly stories.”

“But I never make up stories,” Pete argued.

“I know, but you’re disrupting Dad’s routine,” his mom whispered, gently pushing him back down onto the chair.

“That’s because we need to catch the thing before it tears the house apart,” Pete said, staring at the front page of his father’s newspaper. What caught his eye was the caption, “Jericho’s Couples: Happier than Average.” It was about how families in Pete’s town were better off due to the city’s safety rules covering every aspect of city and home life, from the right way to decorate to the wrong way to hug.

His mom certainly seemed to follow them. She rarely disagreed with his dad, who was never wrong. Their marriage was as bland as lukewarm bath water. If that meant they were better off, then great.

“But it doesn’t explain the strange sounds I heard this morning,” Pete said.

Mrs. Plain smiled at her son. “I’m sure those noises are just in your mind. The psychiatrist I work for calls it ‘phantom echo brain freeze.’”

“I don’t care what he calls it, Mom. I’m not just hearing things,” Pete said.

Mr. Plain set down his newspaper with a huff. “Enough is enough, son. Stop blaming your problems on villains you can’t see and tackle the villain that’s right before your face.”

“‘Villain’ as in this bowl of mushy oatmeal?” Pete asked.

His father cracked a smile, but his mother frowned.

“Oatmeal gives you energy to fight villains. Plus, it’s nutritious,” she said.

Pete grumbled under his breath. He heard heavy breathing, followed by nails clicking on wooden steps. A strange tension filled the air. Pete shivered. It was headed downstairs.

Sharp pains ran through Pete’s toes. “My shoes are too tight.”

“Well, speculating over imaginary beasts won’t solve that problem,” said his dad. “But having Mom take you shopping for new ones will.”

“Why can’t you go with us?” Pete asked.

“I have a meeting after work and won’t be home ‘till late,” his dad said.

“What?” Suddenly his mom didn’t sound so easygoing. “Why didn’t I know about this?”

“It came up at the last minute,” Pete’s dad said coldly. He folded up his newspaper and shoved it in his briefcase.

The clicking and breathing sounds came closer.

Pete picked up his backpack. “May I please be excused? I have a bus to catch.”

“But you didn’t finish breakfast,” his mom said.

“Aw, stop pushing food on him, Patty. You’re making me late for work.” Mr. Plain snatched up his briefcase and raced to the garage.

“At least you could kiss me goodbye, Sam!” Mrs. Plain rushed after him.

Pete took that as his cue to go and rushed to the front door. As he passed the stairway, he glimpsed a faint shadow. He raced outside, his heart beating wildly. He thought he heard a creepy voice mutter, “Ha, Ha, I’ve got him on the run. And the best part is, he doesn’t even know that I exist.”



Chapter 2

Terrorized

Most good citizens of Jericho believed that what they couldn't see wasn't real, except for fresh air, microbes, and space aliens on distant planets. People who could see the invisible realm were sometimes locked up in mental hospitals. Pete hated hospitals. He jumped when the bell rang. School was over at last—or was it?

Mrs. Fischer tapped the blackboard with her pointer. “Remember, kids, you must turn in your summer projects six weeks from now if you wish to be promoted to seventh grade.” The frizzed ends of her short white hair shone like sparks of lightning. Only in Jericho would a teacher give kids homework the same day they were supposed to graduate.

“Why, of all the projects I could pick from, did I choose the twenty-page wildlife research paper?” Pete asked himself. Other projects sounded so much easier, like trekking in the mountains while picking up trash or assembling a model cookie cutter factory with chopsticks. He could just imagine the hours he must spend pouring over dull books in the town library and doing online research with computers dating from the dinosaur age.

Pete's painful orthopedics thud-clicked loudly on the floor as he joined the hordes of children stampeding down the hall. He had a hard time keeping up.

A hand tapped his shoulder. Pete whirled around, his heart pounding, but it was only Pete's best friend and neighbor, Jack Tamer. Jack

was several inches taller than Pete and handsome, with raven black hair, hunter-green eyes, and an olive complexion.

The boys exchanged high-fives.

“Finally, we’re done with this place,” Jack said, moving briskly forward.

“I’m not,” Pete replied, jogging to keep up with the long-legged boy. “Mrs. Fischer has ruined my summer—”

Before Pete could say “break,” Jack grabbed his hand and pulled him down the hallway. “Come with me.”

“What?” Pete asked. “Where are you doing?” His legs ached, and his heels hurt. A sense of dread gnawed at his stomach. When Jack veered from the exit, he cried out in surprise.

“Shhh, not so loud!” Jack said, leading him down a side hall. On a door before them loomed a sign: TEACHERS ONLY. Jack turned the knob and opened the door. The room was dim. Pete fumbled for a chair.

His toes were hurting. “We shouldn’t be in here.”

Motioning Pete to silence, Jack knelt on the rug. He took off his backpack, unzipped it, and removed something that made Pete felt a mix of joy and dread.

“Isn’t that a—a—”

“Yes, it’s a banned comic,” Jack said. “Totally awesome – I mean, awful. It’s forbidden in this town. According to our mayor, these sorts of comics are very dangerous, in his words ‘recklessly creative.’ The colors are too bright, the stories are too cheerful, and the sort of freedom they promote is too extreme. ‘The only comic books we in Jericho consider safe are gray and serious ones,’ he says. ‘They teach kids how to follow our strict rules for pleasing everyone, rather than waste their time on flights of useless fantasy.’”

“So, it’s against the law,” Pete said.

Jack nodded. “And it showed up in my ‘return’ pile of textbooks I brought to school this morning No amount of quantum physics can explain how it got there.”

“Well, maybe forgetfulness could,” Pete said, insulting his friend without trying.

“Don’t disrespect my photographic memory,” Jack snapped. “This is the fifth time something like this has happened to me. The more I try to hide the book, the more it pops up, at all the worst times and in all the wrong places.”

“It almost sounds like it *wants* to be found,” Pete suggested. “Maybe it shouldn’t be banned.”

“Anyhow, I snuck it away before it could be seen, or so I hoped.” Jack looked a little worried.

Pete placed his hand over his rapidly beating heart. “What do you mean, ‘or so you hoped’?”

“Craig Crowburn was in class today,” Jack said.

“You mean the creeper who used to pick on us at recess?” Pete hadn’t seen him in a long time.

“That’s the one,” Jack said. “And I’m sure he didn’t come to school today to get an education.”

Pete agreed. Craig much preferred stealing lunches and shredding children’s homework to actual learning. As the leader of a wimpy-sounding gang called the Bog Fogs (BFs), he covered his tracks like a fog covers a bog, playing mean tricks on kids without getting caught. Pete remembered the time he told his mom about the mud balls Craig socked him with on the playground. She called the school in a panic, and the wrong boy got blamed for it. A cloud of confusion seemed to surround the Bog Fogs, whose cleverly executed pranks made victims seem like bad guys.

“I hope Craig didn’t see the book,” Pete said, his eye drawn to a glimmer of blue on the front cover.

“I don’t know, but if he suspects I have it, then he’s sure to try to steal it and who knows what kind of trouble I’ll get in? That’s why I’m giving it to you for safekeeping until we get home. But we have to hurry if we want to make it out of here alive.” Jack licked his lips hungrily as he eyed the book, not really wanting to give it up. “But it’s for the best,” he whispered to himself. Then in one swift motion, he handed it to Pete.

Pete shivered as he took it. “If it’s so risky to have it, then maybe we should just get rid of it.”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” Jack said. “These comics are too powerful. But at the same time, they’re illegal.”

Pete didn’t understand. “Why are you giving it to me if it’s not safe?”

“Because you’re the best one to guard it. Craig might suspect me of having it, but he’ll never suspect you. He knows you’re too straight-laced to break the law in any way. No way would you be caught with an illegal comic book.”

Pete felt like a bundle of nerves. He shook all over as he held the book out, wanting to give it back but at the same time curious as to what lay inside it.

Jack cast the book a longing glance, then turned his face away and pushed it at Pete. “Just hide it, okay? There’s no need to read it. And another thing—”

They heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

“Hurry, Pete!” Jack whispered, in a shouting sort of way.

Pete ripped open his backpack and stuffed the comic inside. Then they both rushed from the room, startling Mrs. Fischer, who was four feet from the door. Folders, pens, and papers flew from her hands as they ran past her.

“As soon as we get outside, head straight for the bus,” Jack told Pete as they rushed along. “Climb on board as quickly as you can, and guard that comic with your life. Understood?”

“And what about you?” Pete asked.

“I’ll be right behind you. If all goes well, no one will bother us. If not, we may have to split up.” Jack would have said more, but he was back in the main hall near the crowded exit and didn’t want to draw attention to himself or Pete.

Pete’s knees shook as he pushed through the crowd of children squeezing through the double doors. He noticed that the sky was gray with clouds. He hadn’t gone far when he spotted Jack standing like a statue just a few feet away.

Jack stepped in front of Pete and blocked him with his hand. “Don’t look now, but it’s him.”

Pete peered around Jack but couldn't make out the giant figure towering over the walkway. He reached into his shirt pocket for his hated glasses, put them on, and gasped.

It was Craig Crowburn, the dreaded bully with the hazy hazel eyes, oily hair, freckled cheeks, and bumpy nose. Craig had grown so tall, he made even Jack look small. The brownish-gray shirt he wore was imprinted with a picture of a bog. In that bog sat an ugly, warty hog covered by a ghostly fog. Craig had on a pair of dirty tie-dyed pants that looked like they'd been dredged from a mud hole.

"He's got a slime gun," Pete noticed. "And it's filled with something really gross looking."

"It's probably pond scum from the swamp preserve or rotten cream of liver soup," Jack whispered.

Pete stuck his tongue out. "Or even worse, a mushy tuna sandwich soaked in mayonnaise."

They both gagged at the thought. Then suddenly more guns appeared. Three Bog Fogs had come alongside Craig, brandishing their weapons. Two young boys walking nearby saw them and ran off.

"The Fogs are back," an older boy said in disgust. "Don't they know they can't bring guns to school?"

Of course, the Bog Fogs knew guns weren't allowed, which was why they kept them carefully concealed until school let out. Craig's timing in displaying them so boldly was well calculated. He knew the end of the last school day would be a madhouse, with crowds of children streaming out of the building and teachers too busy packing up for summer break to keep an eye on them as they rushed outside. The few security guards on staff were taking a class on how to tiptoe around suspected criminals. It was part of Jericho's prescribed "How to Get Along with Everybody" training.

Craig looked past the mass of students who had just left the building and zeroed in on Pete. The glasses were a dead giveaway. "Well, if it isn't Two Left Feet!"

Pete hated that nickname. His toes hurt as he thought about the comic in his backpack.

Jack elbowed Pete. "Follow the plan. Run for the bus."

Pete wanted to, but he was too surprised by the shadowy face that had just appeared behind Craig's head. It had evil eyes and a long furry snout, and it reminded him of the ghostly form he'd seen upstairs that morning.

"Hurry, Pete," Jack whispered. "Time is running out. Based on the height of individual bullies, the number of slime guns (four), and the sheer volume of homebound students blocking your way, you have less than a literal minute to reach the bus!"

The steel toes of Pete's orthopedics weighed heavily on his feet. He knew he should get moving, but he felt like he was mired in quicksand.

Craig saw the shock in Pete's wide eyes and pointed his gun straight at him. "I see you're speechless, Two Left Feet."

"And I see a flunker who's too afraid to come to school," Jack suddenly blurted out. "What's the matter, Craig? Did you forget your ABCs?"

Craig's eyes grew wide, and his face turned red. He glared at Jack. "Why, you—"

Jack ran in front of Craig and stuck his tongue out at him. "You can't catch me," he said, then ran straight across the parking lot and hid among the cars.

"Hey, come back here!" Craig yelled. "I wasn't done insulting you!" As he and his Bog Fogs chased after Jack, Pete turned to his right, toward the line of buses. His feet throbbed terribly as he stumbled along, puffing hard to catch his breath as he plowed through kid traffic.

"Excuse me, pardon me, let me through," he apologized on the run. His and Jack's bus, number 49, was the farthest one away.

Children were rushing everywhere. Riders boarded buses while walkers raced along the sidewalk which cut through the parking lot where Craig was stalking Jack.

"I'm going to blast you, Jack Tamer, lame shamer, you...you non-Hall-of-Famer!" Craig yelled over the sea of cars.

"Look, over there! I see him!" yelled Burt Laybrik, a Bog Fog with a shrill, hyena-like voice.

Jack, who had darted out from behind a car, ran toward his bus from the side opposite Pete. A full parking lot lay between them. Pete's restrictive shoes slowed him down and made him stumble. He bumped into a muscular girl with blond braids and high cheekbones.

She glared at him. "Watch where you're going, four eyes."

Ignoring the glasses dig, Pete dished out a quick "I'm sorry," and continued on.

The next second, he found himself jerked back. The blond girl had gripped him by his shirt collar and wasn't letting go. "You might think those glasses make you look mild-mannered, but you can't fool me. I can tell you're a girl hater."

"No, I'm not," Pete said, trying not to choke. "I just want to board the bus." As he swung around to face her, she grabbed a shoulder strap of his backpack and tugged.

Pete pulled back and almost got it away from her. Then the girl's friend pounced on him. It was two against one.

As Pete fought the girls off, he saw Jack running toward him, chased by Craig and his Bog Fogs. Pete's glasses fogged up as he blinked at the spooky shadows surrounding the gang. He had to save his friend. Before he could make a move, however, the girls wrested the backpack from him. They tossed it high. Pete scrambled to catch it.

Jack was looking straight ahead and running well. Then he heard a click and looked back.

Whap! Pete's best friend got smacked with an ugly brown-green blob that smelled worse than rotten eggs. Jack screamed and fell to the ground, collapsing from the stench. Pete sprinted toward him in alarm. Glancing up, he saw his backpack sailing into the sky. For one long second, it seemed to float on air. The other children near him were too shocked over the shooting to see what Pete's backpack was doing.

Craig Crowburn and his Bog Fogs showed great interest in Jack's backpack, however. They snuck up on him as he lay moaning on the ground.

"YOW!" "WAH!" "HELP!"

All four Bog Fogs yelped at the sudden burst of light that shone from Pete's backpack. It hit their eyes like a high-powered professional camera flash. It was like being sound asleep in a pitch-black room, then someone flicks a switch and bang! It's supernova time. Craig and his Bog Fogs shut their eyes against the glow.

"R—retreat, guys!" Craig yelled. "L—let's get out of here!"

His followers fled almost as quickly as he did. Everyone clapped to see them go, including a policeman too engulfed in paperwork to chase down bullies. Officers in Jericho were unusually slow at identifying criminals, due to the excessive number of rules they had to follow to make sure they didn't accidentally insult the very bad guys they were trying to arrest.

The comic book Jack gave Pete was about to change all that.



Chapter 3

Out of This World

Pete's backpack lay next to Jack on the pavement. It was no longer glowing. As Pete ran to pick it up, he saw Jack revive. A smelly blob of mud-brown goo oozed down the side of Jack's head. Pete could tell it was no ordinary slime.

Jack moaned as he pushed himself up. "It's like I got hit by a stink hammer." He grabbed his backpack and staggered to his feet, still dizzy from the blow.

Pete held out his arm for Jack to lean on. "We've g-got to get you to a doctor. I'm sure there's more harm in that Bog Fog blob than nauseates the eye."

"Someone's been hurt!" shouted the girl who had attacked Pete.

Whispers were flying. Children were talking. Quite a crowd had formed.

The bus driver stomped down toward them, leaving the engine running. "Knock it off, kids! Whoever doesn't belong on this bus must leave immediately!"

As children scattered, Jack shot Pete a warning look not to draw attention to his splatted head.

Totally missing the cue, Pete pointed to Jack and yelled, "Craig shot slime at him! Call an ambulance!"

Jack stiffened. "That won't be necessary. I have an honorary medical degree and understand my symptoms perfectly. Thanks for your well wishes, but I'm afraid death is inevitable."

“Aw, stop griping and let me apply some expert urgent care!” boomed the bus driver. He pulled a used handkerchief from his pocket and wiped Jack’s head with it. “Wooahoo! The Tamer boy is cured now. Well, kinda, sorta.” Delighted with his good deed, he pranced merrily back to the bus and herded the young passengers on board. Most of them avoided Jack, grossed out by his slimed hair, but loyal Pete sat right next to his friend in the very back of the bus.

Jack punched the empty seatback before him. “It isn’t fair. Why did I get hit with that rotten, stinking blob? Why didn’t you do anything to stop it?”

Pete felt his anger rise. “I was trying to protect the comic book!”

Jack stared at him in horror. “Hush! What are you trying to do, get us in trouble?”

Pete lowered his voice. “No, of course not. I’m in enough trouble already with this stupid summer project. I hate wildlife research.”

“Well, if it requires a trip to the swamp preserve, you can borrow my boots and bug spray. The rabid squirrel alarm I designed myself is in mint condition.” With those words, the slime-struck boy clamped his mouth shut. He closed his eyes as if to shut Pete out.

Pete took off his glasses and shoved them in his shirt pocket, angry at how Jack had snapped at him. He’d done what his best friend asked him to, and all he got for it was flak! Who made Jack such a know-it-all anyway? Pete’s backpack lay like a pillow on his lap. He felt drawn to its unusual warmth which he knew came from the comic book inside it. It couldn’t hurt to take a little peek at the book. Sitting in the back of the bus, shunned by all the other kids, and with Jack’s eyes off him, he had the perfect chance. Pete opened the backpack noiselessly. He reached in and touched the book flap, flush with excitement. His fingers tingled as he drew it out.

Phew! He had done it. Now to look it over.

The back cover showed a picture of a cave. At the opening was a door with an invitation to come inside. The front cover depicted a forest shrouded in a dreamy, white mist. Printed on the picture in bold letters was the word “Rescued.” As Pete stared at the picture, the mist moved.

He blinked. Had he just seen what he thought he saw? Pete peered deeply into the mist and flipped to the first page.

Whoosh! A cool breeze swept across his face. Pete glanced over at Jack, whose eyes were closed. His friend was sleeping.

The breeze had turned into a wind. Pete felt it whip his hair as it blew on him, but Jack's black hair lay flat on his head.

Pete looked back at the page but couldn't see it because the mist was blowing everywhere. Even Jack couldn't be seen. Pete reached out a hand to touch him and grabbed a fistful of air.

"Jack!" he cried. "Where did you go? Jack!"

No one answered him.

Pete paused to set the book down. That's when he realized he was no longer sitting on a bus, reading comics. As the mist lifted, he saw he was sitting on a tree stump in a wooded place. Before him lay a dirt-path covered with mud and sticks.

"Where am I?" he asked. "What's happening? Hello, is anybody there?" He looked around but saw no one.

It was almost as if he'd been kidnapped, but by whom or what he had no idea.